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SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENT PREDICTS SUPPORT FROM IBB, BUHARI

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) In a meeting with Ambassador on December 8, Vice President Atiku Abubakar continued his discussion of his Presidential prospects. Much of his discussion centered on well-worn topics and provided little insight into any evolution in the Vice President's thinking. Atiku appeared relatively composed, but never settled down and cut the meeting much shorter than on previous occasions. He also never broached a subject that would indicate what the "emergency" that initiated the last minute meeting might be.

¶2. (C) The Vice President described the current political climate as "frightening times." He worried that the efforts of President Obasanjo to extend his tenure had not yet played out. He credited Obasanjo's Chief of Staff with the observation that "Mr. President says he is going but his body language is different." When asked about the military, Atiku ventured that they would show restraint "as much as they are able."

¶3. (C) Atiku correctly predicted the withdrawal of former head of state Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) and said that a plan would soon be announced for IBB to back his own candidacy against the PDP. He claimed that Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, former National Security Adviser and IBB acolyte, would continue his efforts to win the PDP nomination but that Gusau expected merely to "throw some confusion" into the nominating convention. He claimed that Yar'Adua remained the choice of the President but that most of the PDP governors viewed their colleague as a weak and unsuitable candidate.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: While Atiku seemed much more at ease than just after the security incident that preceded the last meeting, he appeared to be less focused on the political and security issues than on his upcoming travel to the U.S. His prediction on IBB's withdrawal, which came true this week, was spot on. The question remains as to whether his analysis that IBB would back him was accurate or self-serving (or both). As the political conventions kick off, there is still no word on Atiku's preferred vehicle for his Presidential bid and questions remain as to whether the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) will allow him to contest at all.

CAMPBELL